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Large slow worm *Anguis fragilis* from Ailsa Craig, Ayrshire.

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Slow worms *Anguis fragilis* were known to inhabit Ailsa Craig from some of the earliest comments on the terrestrial fauna of the island. Lawson (1888) referred to them as "... a curious denizen of the Craig", and noted that they were "very abundant". But by the time of the second edition of his book (1895), during which period brown rats *Rattus norvegicus* had invaded the island (Campbell, 1892), the position had changed to the point where the human inhabitants of the island declared, when interviewed, that "...they are almost exterminated. We think the rats must have done for them. A short while ago you could hardly turn over a stone without finding two or three under it - now you can scarcely find one."

Slow worms did however survive on Ailsa Craig. Leighton (1903) noted that J M Campbell had found specimens on Ailsa Craig measuring 18 inches long (457 mm). Gibson (1969) described them as fairly common but in thirty years had failed to find one above 14 inches long (355 mm). Anecdotally, Lawson (1888) had mentioned a slow worm measuring 21½ inches (546 mm) that had been caught on Ailsa but no competent naturalist had recorded the event.

Smith (1964) gave the length of the largest slow worms recorded in Britain as 460mm. Frazer (1983) noted that they commonly reached 400 mm in length but the largest recorded was by Fairfax (1965) who found a male specimen at Portsmouth, England, measuring 489 mm.

Since 1986 I have measured and weighed most of the slow worms found casually on Ailsa Craig and have accumulated over 50 records. In 1992 I caught a large example measuring 441 mm but this was superseded on 12 May 2000 when I caught a mating pair, the male of which measured 490 mm - a British record. It weighed 49 gms.

Following a major rat eradication campaign in spring 1991, and again in winter 1992, regular monitoring showed Ailsa Craig to be free of rats for the first time in over 100 years (Zonfrillo, in prep). The fact that this predator has been removed and, given that the main food of slow worms - slugs and snails - are abundant on

Ailsa Craig, this may account for an increase in survival and therefore size of the slow worms on Ailsa Craig. Slow worms are long-lived and it remains to be seen if specimens the size of that recorded anecdotally in Lawson's time will be found in future on Ailsa Craig.

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Ravens nesting alongside the Dumbarton Boulevard

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Ravens *Corvus corax* L. have taken a further step in the expansion of their breeding range in lowland Dunbartonshire, with the establishment of a nesting pair on the south side of the still worked Dumbuck Quarry, the occupied rock face directly overlooking the busy A82 (Fig. 1). Despite the quarrying activity and the almost constant flow of road traffic throughout the day, the birds have bred successfully at this site for at least four years (1997-2000). Dumbuck Quarry offers an exceptional opportunity for watching raven behaviour at the nest, as the unconcerned parent birds' comings and goings in spring can be readily observed with binoculars from the cycleway on the opposite side of the road.

It may be their offspring which have recently been seen displaying around Dumbarton Rock - less than 2 kms distant from the quarry. Unfortunately, the steepest faces below the castle fortifications are often used by rock climbers, the disturbance this creates probably sufficient to deter a second pair of ravens moving into Dumbarton's urban fringe.

Urban magpies and crows

Fig. 1. Raven nesting site overlooking Dumbarton's main thoroughfare



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These vigorous corvids get a bad press through increasing numbers while sometimes (especially magpies) predated nests and youngsters of other and declining species. They do seem to have increased in urban areas, though in the vicinity of Hyndland Court, Glasgow, G12 9NR, the immediately visible nesting numbers remain stable at one pair of each, temporarily increasing to about four of each from breeding, plus occasional visitors.

From time to time temporary social gatherings are seen. Presumably these gatherings are drawn from a limited nearby area and may perhaps be more representative of the general local population numbers. From 1982 to date I recorded the numbers seen at this address, including the maximum seen on any occasion each month corresponding to any such gatherings. The highest monthly count each year was compared with corresponding counts in other years in 5-year groups (three years for 1982-84) and tabulated, together with the mean of these annual maxima for each group (Table 1, next page).

These averages of highest counts of magpies

increase over the period until the last decade of the 20th century when they remained stable. The largest gatherings of magpies seen numbered 15 (31 December 1992), 24 (19 September 1993), 12 (1 March 1996), and 22 (23 March 1999). The crows show a slower and less regular increase, with maximum gatherings of 12 (November 1986), 10 (2 February 1993), 12 (24 October 1995) and 10 (27 November 1996).

The gatherings recorded were those which I happen to have seen, obviously omitting any which took place when I was not there to notice. In this urban vicinity both species show a marked increase over the 18 year period, particularly magpies. This accords with long-term trends for Britain in surveys by the British Trust for Ornithology, as recently recorded by Glue (2000). If their numbers were determined mainly by availability of prey, the current decline of most small urban songbirds should have reduced the corvids. The increase in corvids presumably reflects increased availability of other foods (e.g. garbage, discarded food scraps), perhaps more nest sites as urban trees mature, and reduced levels of persecution since the end of World War II (Glue 2000).

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Magpie behaviour in Kelvingrove Park

Table. Maximum counts of magpies and crows seen from Hyndland Court 1982-1999

Period	Magpies (<i>Pica pica</i>)		Crows (<i>Corvus corone</i>)	
	Total of maxima	mean	Total of maxima	mean
1982-84	7*	2.3	6	2
1985-89	27	5.4	29	5.6
1990-94	59	11.8	24	4.8
1995-99	54	10.8	38	7.6

* Sum of highest counts in 1992 (=3), 1983 (=2), 1984 (=2)

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In common with others of the crow family, the magpie evokes mixed feelings: the story that it refused to go into the Ark with Noah and the other animals damned it in many peoples' eyes for it preferred instead to sit on top of the Ark and chatter and swear as the world drowned. The magpie dominates Kelvingrove, as at Spring 1999-2000 there are at least 15 birds. Their chattering is part of park life and they are a nuisance to everything else. Notable behaviour includes following squirrels around and digging up nuts that they have buried, immediately the squirrel's back is turned. Fighting between themselves and other birds is common: this was clearly illustrated in cruel incidents between the 6th – 7th April 1999. Fierce and sustained attacks were made by magpies on a single member of their species, culminating in an all out attack on the 7th. I was attracted to the duck pond area of Kelvingrove by screaming that early morning and found the single bird in a very bad way with the eye-lids half closed, downed on the park pathway. It was by then no longer able to fly and attempts to escape were thwarted by a group of magpies. Attack was constant and even when I stood by the injured bird, two magpies in particular still tried to get at it. The victim's submissive behaviour in no way saved it and I remained with the bird for as long as I could but it then tried to run along the path to cover and once again the assault began. The sequence of attacks ran from the pond down to the River Kelvin. It is not right to interfere in "nature's way" but this incident was as bad as I have ever seen. I was told by a young woman at the time, that she too had tried to help the badly mauled magpie at the start of the attacks on the 6th. It did not in the end prove possible to give the bird any real chance of survival and magpie remains were spotted in the Kelvin on the 9th at which time too the magpies involved in the assault were bitterly scolding me.

Magpie savagery continued a feature of parkland life

with their taking on the many local gulls. The magpies also attack cats predated in the park: 21st March 2000 some 14 magpies cornered a cat in a tree near the fountain, the cat eventually fleeing to thick cover.

Magpies are now the principal birds of the parkland, much to the disadvantage it would seem of everything else: they are surprisingly vicious.

Great spotted woodpecker nest in Kelvingrove in 1999

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Woodpeckers first explored an ailing willow tree near the pedestrian bridge in Kelvingrove as a potential nest site in 1998. It was not used that year, but in May 1999, it was cleared out by the woodpeckers and a nest was soon active. Visited daily from the 1st to the 18th June it proved possible to observe the birds' nesting habits. The woodpeckers fed the nestlings during periods of observation at an average of 4 minute intervals: foraging trips varied slightly in time and it can be assumed reflected distance travelled to find food. Early morning observations revealed extensive nest cleaning and faecal matter was taken out from the nest and dropped by the woodpeckers in surrounding parkland and notably in the River Kelvin. Birds carried sizeable amounts of waste, including twiggy material from the hole.

The birds reacted very badly to the presence of larger birds, such as magpie, and either scolded or took such evasive action as to distract other birds from the nest hole. The birds' caution did not however stop a great tit actually entering their nest hole on the 4th June but it was quickly away again.

A woodpecker chick appeared at the nest hole from